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# Proust's Choreographies of Writing: *A la recherche du temps perdu* and the Modern Dance Revolution

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## Abstract

*Beyond the personal interest Proust took in Ballets Russes productions, what role did the modern dance revolution spearheaded by pioneers such as Nijinsky and Isadora Duncan play in shaping the author's modernist sensitivity? This article explores the manifold resonances between the profound mutation dance underwent in the early decades of the twentieth century and the Recherche, from the emergence of new forms of embodied subjectivity to the interest in polyvalent gender and sexual identities, and, more broadly, a preoccupation with the expressive language of the body. Dance, it will be argued, not only informed reflections on the fluidity of artistic contemplation and the impermanence of theatrical art; it was assimilated into choreographic representations of gesture and the kinaesthetic body.*

The genesis and publishing history of *A la recherche du temps perdu* are curiously entwined with another watershed in the history of European modernism, the early twentieth-century modern dance revolution: while the novel's birth in 1909 – that is, the transition from Sainte-Beuve narrative to the novel of remembrance – coincides with the dazzling entry of Serge Diaghilev's Ballets Russes on the Paris stage, the publication of its first volume, *Du côté de chez Swann*, in 1913 is concurrent with the troupe's most controversial performance, the riot-provoking *Sacre du printemps*. Like many contemporary artists, Proust enthusiastically embraced the new choreographic language and mixed-media forms of Ballets Russes productions, becoming a regular visitor from the 1910 season onwards. He relished such iconic works as *Schéhérazaïde*, *Cléopâtre*, *Les Sylphides* and *L'Oiseau de Feu* and is likely to have seen or at least been aware of the more modernist ballets that entered the repertoire in 1912 when the troupe's star dancer Vaslav Nijinsky took over as chief choreographer.<sup>1</sup> A degree of uncertainty surrounds Proust's presence at the choreographer's most challenging works, *L'Après-midi d'un faune* and *Le Sacre du printemps*, but we can assume that he saw *Jeux*, Nijinsky's 'tableau of modern life', which bewildered audiences with its angular,

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<sup>1</sup> Though very short, Nijinsky's role as choreographer radically changed the aesthetic of Ballets Russes choreography. He was replaced by Léonide Massine in 1913.

decomposed movement language.<sup>2</sup> We know for certain that he attended the avant-gardist *Parade* co-created by Cocteau, Satie and Massine with striking Cubist-style sets and costumes by Picasso – '[c]omme Picasso est *beau*', he marvels in a letter to Cocteau.<sup>3</sup> What is more, Proust enjoyed a privileged access to and insight into the creative practices of the Ballets Russes thanks to several of his friends, who counted among the troupe's artistic collaborators: Reynaldo Hahn wrote the music for *Le Dieu Bleu* to a libretto co-written by Cocteau; the multitalented poet also penned the text of *Parade* and designed the poster for *Le Spectre de la rose*, a ballet based on a story by Jean-Louis Vaudoyer, one of Proust's regular interlocutors. Other acquaintances like the Comtesse Greffulhe (who was a cousin of Diaghilev) and Robert de Montesquiou played an important role as artistic promoters or even financiers of the company's first Paris seasons. Proust himself socialised with Diaghilev, Léon Bakst and, at least on one occasion, Nijinsky and took a keen interest in publications on Ballets Russes choreography and aesthetic.<sup>4</sup>

In his correspondence, Proust enthuses over Bakst's sumptuous set and costume designs or the virtuosity and expressiveness of the dancers, declaring in a letter to Hahn that he has 'jamais vu rien de plus beau' than the Orientalist *Schéhérazade*.<sup>5</sup> In the *Recherche*, by contrast, mention of the Ballets Russes and of dance more widely is comparatively sparse. As Michèle M. Magill remarks, of the staggering twenty-five thousand references consecrated to the arts in the *Recherche*, scarcely a dozen relate to dance.<sup>6</sup> Like the cinema, automobiles and airplanes, the Ballets Russes appear above all as markers of modernity as well as emblems of artistic and social change during the first decades of the twentieth century.<sup>7</sup> In *La Prisonnière*, the Narrator comments on 'ces grands rénovateurs du goût, du théâtre, qui, dans un art peut-être plus factice que la peinture, firent une révolution aussi profonde que l'Impressionnisme'.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Maurice Rostand claims to have seen *L'Après-midi d'un faune* in the company of Proust (*Confession d'un demi-siècle*, Paris, La Jeune Parque, 1948, 175), but, surprisingly, Proust makes no reference to the performance in his correspondence, although he does allude to the ballet in a letter to Paul Morand written in 1918 (Marcel Proust, *Correspondance*, ed. Philip Kolb, Paris: Plon, 1970-1993, 21 vols (hereafter *Corr.*), XVIII, 143). In his biography of Proust, Jean-Yves Tadié states that he did attend the first night of *Le Sacre du printemps*, but adds in a footnote that there is no proof of this (Marcel Proust, Paris, Gallimard, 1996, 694, note 6). According to Philip Kolb, Proust attended all three ballets, including *Jeux* on 15 May 1913 (*Corr.*, XII, 12 and 175, note 13).

<sup>3</sup> Letter to Jean Cocteau, written shortly after 21 May 1917 (*Corr.*, XVIII, 267).

<sup>4</sup> He read Hahn's article on *Schéhérazade* published in *Le Journal*, 19 June 1910; Jean-Louis Vaudoyer's 'Variations sur les ballets russes', *Revue de Paris*, 15 July 1910; André Suarès's 'Chronique de Caërdal VII: Beauté de la danse', *Nouvelle Revue française*, 44 (1912); Henry Bidou's 'L'Après-midi d'un faune et l'esthétique de M. Nijinski', *Journal des débats*, 12 June 1912; as well as Cocteau's reflections on Nijinsky, *Le Spectre de la rose* and *Parade* in *Le Coq et l'Arlequin* (Paris: De la Sirène, 1918).

<sup>5</sup> *Corr.*, X, 258. See also his letters to Hahn following Nijinsky's dismissal from the Imperial Theatres (*Corr.*, X, 248 and X, 258) and a letter to Mme Henri de Regnier in which he expresses compassion for the dancer afflicted by mental illness (*Corr.*, XXI, 233).

<sup>6</sup> 'Pas de pas de deux pour Proust: l'absence de la danse dans *A la recherche du temps perdu*', *Dalhousie French Studies*, 53 (2000), 49-55 (49).

<sup>7</sup> On the figures of modernity in the *Recherche*, see William Carter, *The Proustian Quest* (New York: NYU Press, 1992) and Hugo Azérad, *L'Univers constellé de Proust, Joyce et Faulkner: le concept d'épiphanie dans l'esthétique du modernisme* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2002).

<sup>8</sup> Marcel Proust, *A la recherche du temps perdu*, ed. Jean-Yves Tadié (Paris: Gallimard, 'Pléiade', 1987-89), 4 vols, III, 742.

Yet, despite the paradigm-shifting role that is assigned to it, dance – unlike painting, music and literature – seems to have no immediately discernible narrative function in the novel, prompting Magill to speculate whether

l'art de la danse, art physique par excellence, ne serve que peu à la méditation artistique que sous-tend l'ensemble de l'œuvre proustienne, [...] que l'aspect sensuel et immédiat de cet art, où le corps étale et exprime émotions et passions, sans l'intermédiaire du mot, de la toile ou de l'instrument, même s'il plaît à la sensibilité de l'auteur [...], ne touche que peu la pensée du Narrateur.<sup>9</sup>

Given Proust's attention to embodied forms of consciousness in the novel and the Narrator's extensive exploration of the feeling and remembering body, such a hypothesis seems surprising at the least. Magill herself cautions against hasty conclusions from the relative absence of dance in the text, but, ultimately, seems to identify few resonances between Proust and dance beyond the contemporary artistic context and the author's personal interest in Ballets Russes productions. Rather than focusing merely on explicit references in the text, it would seem more productive to explore the manifold – albeit more oblique – ways in which Proust engaged with the profound mutation dance underwent in the first decades of the twentieth century: the break with the French classical tradition that is heralded by Ballets Russes choreography, the invention of a new form of subjectivity conveyed by the body in movement, the new repertoire of gestures and plastic forms that projected the dancing body into modernity. To what degree was the new philosophy of dance that emerged in tandem with the *Recherche* assimilated into the novel's poetics, shaping representations of the gesturing, kinaesthetic body? Is it possible to detect a choreography of movement analogous to dance choreography in Proust's writing? How can the early twentieth-century dance revolution that Proust witnessed enrich our understanding of the singular connection between movement, feeling, sexuality and the body that crystallises in the *Recherche*? These and other questions relating to the literature/dance interface in the *Recherche* will form the core of this article.

### *Theatre and Dance: The Aesthetics of Immediacy and Motion*

When the Ballets Russes entered the Paris stage in 1909, an artistic revolution shattered the rigid, highly codified dance language that still dominated French classical ballet. As Juliet Bellow explains in her groundbreaking study *Modernism on Stage: The Ballets Russes and the Parisian Avant-Garde*, the deceptively spontaneous choreographies of the troupe's first

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<sup>9</sup> Magill (2000), 54.

choreographer, Michel Fokine, broke with the conservative balletic language of the French classical tradition perfected by Marius Petipa.<sup>10</sup> The free movement language of Fokine's productions, where each pose flows into the next, made the dance performances appear natural, giving the impression that the highly trained virtuoso dancers were improvising on stage. The apparent freedom and ease of movement in Ballets Russes choreographies compelled critics to announce nothing less than a revolution of the modern body: the troupe's sensualist, energetic performances were hailed as a long overdue liberation from the rule-bound dance language of the great French tradition, whose stale formalism they replaced with a more spontaneous, expressive choreographic style. From the outset, contemporary discourses around the Ballets Russes – which, as Bellow points out, were strongly tinged with racial and cultural presuppositions<sup>11</sup> – posited a dichotomy between the atrophied, corseted body of French 'civilisation' and the natural, sensuous body of Oriental 'primitivism'. Raymond Nolin's 1912 comment that dance is 'an art of the impulsive' and his regret that civilisation has 'diminish[ed] the diversity of gestures' sums up the tenet of contemporary discussions that extended beyond dance to a wider critique of the impoverishing and alienating conditions of twentieth-century modernity.<sup>12</sup> Harking back to Nietzsche's association of dance with Dionysian intoxication in *The Birth of Tragedy* and his advocacy of a return to a more embodied, ecstatic experience, critics such as Nolin embraced the primordial energy of the Ballets Russes as a new lease of life for the inexpressive bodies of the modern age. In their rich intermedial dialogue between music, painting, the decorative arts, choreography and dance, the Ballets Russes not only seemed to perfect the Wagnerian and Symbolist projects of the total artwork; their intensity, fluid movement grammar and liberated body language promised, in Bellow's words, to 'reconnect the modern body with its estranged roots'.<sup>13</sup>

The Ballets Russes make an appearance in Proust's preparatory drafts as early as 1910, the year in which he discovered the troupe's expressive new dance language and sumptuous set and costume designs. In *cahier* 67, a notebook devoted among other things to the great actress later to become La Berma, the author sketches out the Narrator's initial disappointment at the actress's performance of *Phèdre* followed by his deeper understanding as to what constitutes the essence of theatrical art. Misapprehension and discernment – typical patterns of learning in the *Bildungsroman* that is *A la recherche* – still feature together here, though the author makes a note to himself to defer the Narrator's insight to a later point in the

<sup>10</sup> London: Ashgate, 2013. See especially the Introduction and the first chapter, which charts the evolution and reception of Ballets Russes style from *Schéhérazaïde* to *Le Sacre du printemps*.

<sup>11</sup> During the first few seasons of the Ballets Russes, critics 'separated the barbaric, instinctive and "Oriental" Russians from their cultured, Occidental viewers' (Bellow (2013), 29).

<sup>12</sup> Raymond Nolin, 'Les Ballets Russes au point de vue de l'Art', *Ombres et formes* (August 1912), 133-5, cited in Bellow (2013), 32.

<sup>13</sup> Bellow (2013), 35.

text. Significantly, in this early draft, theatrical art and the art of dance intersect in a sustained reflection on the fugitive nature of artistic contemplation strongly informed by the *Schéhérazade* production Proust had seen at the Paris Opera. The Narrator muses that this moment of aesthetic pleasure cannot be frozen in time, even if the spectator would like to deepen the impression of beauty afforded by the sets and costumes designed by a 'peintre de génie' (Proust seems to be referring here to the painter and scene designer Bakst).<sup>14</sup> Likewise, the inspired mimicry and postures of the dancer of genius – easily identifiable as Nijinsky, who danced the slave in the 1910 *Schéhérazade* production – must remain in constant flow:

Ce danseur de génie a fait cette mimique qui vous semble inspirée, mais déjà son corps a pris une autre attitude, il ne doit en garder aucune et si quand il salue à la fin vous applaudissez à tout rompre pour signifier le plaisir continu qu'il vous a donné, il a atteint sa gloire de danseur. Par la mémoire, ou si vous le connaissez, en la lui faisant refaire vous pouvez isoler l'attitude. Mais le plaisir d'une seconde qu'elle nous donne au moment où une autre se mue en elle, avant qu'elle se mue en la suivante, c'est le but du chorégraphe et le sien. A la fin de la représentation la Krauss, Sarah Bernhardt, Nijinski ont pu être sublimes, c'est fini, le sublime a été atteint parce que vous aurez senti: C'est sublime, et non parce qu'il sera resté immobilisé devant vous (R<sup>2</sup> I, 1002).

Whilst the end of the sketch refers to some of the foremost figures of the opera, theatre and ballet of the time, the overall reflection on the fugitive nature of artistic experience seems above all derived from dance – the kinetic art par excellence – rather than music or the stage. Echoing Proust's own experience of Ballets Russes performances, the Narrator gains a deeper understanding of the ontology of the performing arts, that is, their immediacy and impermanence. The continuity of movement that characterised the early Ballets Russes choreographies by Fokine, where each dancer's gesture and posture flows into the next, reveals to him a fundamental aesthetic lesson: that artistic contemplation and, by extension, representation ('c'est le but du chorégraphe et le sien'), must accommodate mobility and change.<sup>15</sup> Just as the paintings of Elstir alert the Narrator to the expressive power of metaphor as a literary tool, the essence of dance – its status as a temporal medium and its combination of plasticity and kinesthesia – thus seems to have informed the more mobile,

<sup>14</sup> As the Pléiade editors remark, it is ironic that, in this sketch, Proust should refer to elements of the production that are mentioned in an article on *Schéhérazade* by Reynaldo Hahn (published in *Le Journal*, 10 June 1910) but which, as we know from his letter to Hahn, he was unable to see when attending the performance himself: 'Qu'est-ce que c'est que tes bleus, je ne les ai pas vus' (*Corr.*, X, 114). See R<sup>2</sup> I, 1502, note 2.

<sup>15</sup> In the published text, this fundamental insight is gained during the second Berma performance the Narrator attends at the Opera, when he realises that 'ce charme répandu au vol sur un vers, ces gestes instables perpétuellement transformés, ces tableaux successifs, c'était le résultat fugitif, le but momentané, le mobile chef-d'oeuvre que l'art théâtral se proposait et que détruirait en voulant le fixer l'attention d'un auditeur trop épris' (R<sup>2</sup> II, 352).

multi-faceted conception of character that Proust will establish as key principles for his own modernist work. It is no mere coincidence, then, that in the passage from *Sodome et Gomorrhe* cited above, the comment on the 'efflorescence prodigieuse des Ballets russes' (R<sup>2</sup> III, 140) is preceded by a reflection on the necessity to describe characters as they evolve over time: 'De sorte que même les salons ne peuvent être dépeints dans une immobilité statique qui a pu convenir jusqu'ici à l'étude des caractères, lesquels devront eux aussi être comme entraînés dans un mouvement quasi historique' (*ibid.*). Dance – an art form defined by movement in flux – serves as a foil for the 'psychologie dans le temps' (IV, 137) Proust sets out in the *Recherche*.

In the published text of *A l'ombre des jeunes filles en fleurs*, all allusions to *Schéhrazade* in the *Phèdre* scene have been omitted. In the course of the novel's genesis, as Nathalie Mauriac-Dyer explains with regard to Ballets Russes and artistic references more widely, 'les références se dispersent tout en s'opacifiant'.<sup>16</sup> But dance as some kind of *Urtext* nonetheless continues to reverberate in later discussions of Berma's performance, in particular in Bergotte's exegesis of the actress's art, which, revealingly, revolves around gesture rather than diction. For the cultured Bergotte, in stark opposition to the pedantic Norpois, it is not Berma's judicious choice of roles and costume, nor indeed her celebrated voice, that constitute her art, but, rather, her evocation of the masterpieces of Greek antiquity through gestural language. A pose in which the actress remains motionless, with her arm lifted at shoulder height, makes him wonder whether she visits museums in search for inspiration (I, 550). In conversation with the equally learned Swann, the novelist suggests that it is the Archaic Greek art of the sixth century B.C. that is brought alive in the actress's singular pose. Bergotte's art-historical analysis, as Mauriac-Dyer demonstrates in a fascinating genetic study, was lifted almost verbatim from an article by Henry Bidou, which traces Nijinsky's choreographic language in *L'Après-midi d'un faune* in sixth-century sculptures by Mikkiades and Archermos. The allusion to the actress's research in museums is similarly borrowed from Bidou's text.<sup>17</sup> Indeed, if Sarah Bernhardt, commonly considered as the model for La Berma, can be seen adopting classical poses in contemporary stage photographs, it was above all the dancer-cum-choreographer Nijinsky who drew inspiration for his choreographies in Archaic Greek art, which he researched in libraries and the Louvre's Collection of Antiquities.<sup>18</sup> In his first choreographed ballet *L'Après-midi d'un faune*, which shocked Paris audiences in equal measure with its new avant-garde dance language and the

<sup>16</sup> 'Bidou, Bergotte, la Berma et les Ballets Russes. Une enquête génétique', *Genesis*, 36 (2013), 51.

<sup>17</sup> Mauriac-Dyer (2013), 54-57. Bidou's article followed the appreciative pieces on *L'Après-midi d'un faune* by Cocteau in *Comœdia*, 28 May 1912 and by Jacques-Emile Blanche in *Le Figaro*, 29 May 1912. The latter entitled 'L'Antiquité en 1912' also refers to Nijinsky's recycling of the iconography of ancient Greek sculpture.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. Bellow (2013), 54. In his article 'L'Après-midi d'un faune et l'esthétique de M. Nijinski' Bidou argues that Nijinsky's subtle art 'intéresse tous les interprètes tragiques'. Mauriac-Dyer reads Proust's transposition of characteristics of Nijinsky's art to La Berma as a possible homage the author is making to the journalist (60).

faun's 'indecent' on-stage masturbation (duly censored after the first performance), Nijinsky constructs a disjointed movement grammar modelled on 'primitive' Aegean art. The male dancer's – that is, in the 1912 performance, Nijinsky himself – frozen postures, especially his open palms and straightened thumbs, just like the nymphs' bent knees, static upper body and immobile pose consisting of one lifted arm while the other rests on the hip, evoke the two-dimensionality of Greek bas-reliefs.

Berma's gestural language borrowed from Greek art equally brings to mind the solo dances of another pioneer of modern dance, Isadora Duncan, who conquered the *Tout-Paris* with her bare-foot, tunic-clad performances inspired by Classical Antiquity. Like Nijinsky, Duncan took inspiration for her choreographies in Greek vases and bas-reliefs from the British Museum and the Louvre as well as in Ancient Greek sites which she visited on several occasions.<sup>19</sup> Akin to the Ballets Russes project, albeit in a much simpler dance style, her dances sought to establish a new relationship to the body through an expressive choreography based on less codified, more natural forms of movement. Proust only mentions the American dancer once in his correspondence,<sup>20</sup> but, given her popularity, there can be no doubt that he knew of her work. In fact, it is quite plausible that he may have met her and even seen her dance in the salons of some of his friends who hosted her early performances: she made her artistic debut *chez* Comtesse Greffulhe, Madeleine Lemaire and the Princesse de Polignac,<sup>21</sup> and as the partner of the Princesse's brother, Paris Singer (and mother of their child), the dancer would also have been a regular presence in the Polignac circle frequented by Proust. Duncan's own career, like the *Recherche*, is singularly tied to the Ballets Russes. If her triumph in the Paris art world coincided with the troupe's first season of 1909, her consecration as the muse for Antoine Bourdelle's sculpted façade of the Théâtre des Champs Elysée (inaugurated in 1913 and soon to host the controversial *Sacre du printemps*) more permanently associated her with the legendary company. In one of the building's bas-reliefs entitled 'La Danse', the dancer can be seen interlaced with Nijinsky – the two pioneers who changed the course of modern dance, but never performed together, forever united in the capital's new temple for theatrical art.

### *'Le Danseur de génie': Androgynous Body/ Polymorphous Sexuality*

<sup>19</sup> It is noteworthy that the great fashion designer Fortuny dressed both Sarah Bernhardt and Isadora Duncan, designing Greek costumes after original pieces for the latter. See Peter Collier, *Proust and Venice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 79-80.

<sup>20</sup> In a letter to Hahn of 17 or 18 August 1912 he refers to a denigrating article about the dancer by André Suarès (*Corr.*, XI, 182).

<sup>21</sup> See James Ross, 'Music in the French Salon', in *French Music Since Berlioz* eds. Richard Langham-Smith and Caroline Potter (London: Ashgate, 2005), 105-06. Robert de Montesquiou published an article on Duncan which Proust is likely to have read: 'Terpsichore et Hygie', *Gil Blas*, 3 March 1909 reprinted in *Têtes d'expression* (Paris: Emile-Paul Frères, 1912).



The Ballets Russes' main star Nijinsky is mentioned several times in the *Recherche* as part of a wider reflection on artistic change during the first decades of the twentieth century. Yet whilst the visual arts, theatre and literature are all embodied by a central artist figure, there is no dancer or choreographer mentor figure in the novel. Although, as we will see, Proust frequently draws on dance and choreography in his writing, the only description of a professional dancer figures in *Le Côté de Guermantes*, in the scene in the theatre where Rachel makes advances to a mysterious dancer, who rehearses backstage. Strolling among the sets, the Narrator takes sight of a young man garbed in an exotic, colourful costume delicately made up like a character in a Watteau painting. From the outset, the graceful dancer, ecstatically lost in his gestural movement, is contrasted with the mundane journalists and admirers of the actresses who attend rehearsals: he is 'étranger aux préoccupations de leur vie, [...] antérieur aux habitudes de leur civilisation' (R<sup>2</sup> II, 475) – a butterfly lost in the crowd. In early drafts for the scene, Proust paints a more detailed picture of the dancer and his movements, which leaves little doubt as to the inspiration behind the enraptured soloist: 'C'était un célèbre et génial danseur d'une troupe étrangère qui avait en ce moment un si grand succès à Paris qu'on adjoignait souvent un acte de ballet à des spectacles différents' (II, 1155). Though not named, the dancer is given the features that set Nijinsky, the Ballets Russes' star soloist, apart from male French dancers of the time, that is, his ability to perform *en pointe* and his legendary jumps ('bondissait légèrement jusqu'aux frises', *ibid*). The comparison to insects and plants in the portrait the Narrator draws of the dancer's face recalls Nijinsky's hybrid stage persona in *Le Spectre de la rose*, a lyrical ballet choreographed by Fokine, which Proust had seen at the Théâtre du Châtelet in 1911. The Narrator insists on the dazzling arabesques traced by the dancer's movements, as well as on his airborne weightlessness and desire for an original dance vocabulary – further attributes that evoke the technical bravura and genuine artistic quest of the Ballets Russes' main star. The description of the dancer's Orientalist costume, finally, as pointed out by the Pléiade editors, may be inspired by the garment worn by Nijinsky in *Le Pavillon d'Armide*, one of the ballets performed in Paris in 1909 as part of the first Ballets Russes season (II, 1915).<sup>22</sup>

The scene in the theatre, together with the portrait of Miss Sacripant in *A l'ombre des jeunes filles en fleurs* and the many other passages staging homosexual and bisexual men and women in the novel, is a core piece in Proust's reformulation of rigid gender and sexual identities. As Aine Larkin points out, dance here is the 'means by which traditional constructs of masculinity are challenged', while, at the same time, the central role of the ballerina as the

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<sup>22</sup> For readings of the scene see also Aine Larkin, 'Theatre and Dance', in *Marcel Proust in Context*, ed. Adam Watt (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 101-02 and Jo Yoshida, 'Proust et les ballets russes: Autour de Nijinski', *Bulletin d'informations proustiennes*, 31 (2000), 51-6.

beholder of the gaze in traditional ballet is upended.<sup>23</sup> Proust's reworking of the scene evinces a marked movement from normative heterosexual to more fluid sexual and gender identities. In early drafts, the exchange between Rachel and the dancer is still rich in heterosexual innuendo. '[E]st-ce qu'elles font ça aussi avec les femmes vos petites mains?', the young woman asks him provocatively, to which he replies, 'Et encore bien d'autres choses' (1156). When the jealous Saint-Loup tries to rein his mistress in, she threatens: 'je ne t'embrasserai pas [...] avant que j'aie couché avec le danseur' (1157). In the published text, by contrast, the dancer is feminised whereas the sexual advances Rachel makes to him allude to her own bisexuality: 'Tu as l'air d'une femme toi-même, je crois qu'on pourrait très bien s'entendre avec toi et une de mes amies. [...] [O]n en fera des parties' (478). Like Morel, Rachel, Albertine and indeed, as readers will discover in due course, Saint-Loup himself, the dancer is polysexual. He is (or at least is imagined to be so because of his feminised body language) part of the pact between Sodom and Gomorrah which Proust maps out in the later stages of the novel, where Albertine's sodomist fantasies and Morel's forays into the world of lesbian desire perturb traditional sexual taxonomies. A 'homme/femme' who transcends traditional gender divides and sexual identities, he exercises a singular attraction to the similarly ambivalent Rachel.

Nijinsky's own polyvalent sexual and gender identities, well known among his contemporary public, made him a particularly apposite model for the androgynous dancer. As Bellow explains, Fokine's choreographies – which Proust seemed to have in mind when describing the scene – were notoriously rife with gender ambiguity: 'in one evening, Nijinsky might go from playing the relatively traditional male lead in *Les Sylphides* to the lascivious Golden Slave in *Schéhrazade* to the quasi-feminine character in *Le Spectre de la rose*, dressed in a pink body stocking festooned with petals'.<sup>24</sup> In the latter ballet in particular, the contrast between the masculine leg work and the feminine delicacy of the movement of the arms, enhanced by the ballerina-like costume, head gear and makeup, kept this intriguing figure in deliberate limbo between masculine and feminine representational codes. The great E.O. Hoppé's stage photographs of Nijinsky as the spectre of the rose, in their emphasis on the dancer's delicate feminine face, shoulders and hourglass-shaped upper body sharply contrasted with his strong, muscular legs, offer an arresting image of the androgynous. The carefully constructed gender ambivalence surrounding Nijinsky's stage persona was reinforced by the publicly known relationship between the dancer and his impresario Diaghilev in real life<sup>25</sup> – a relationship which came to an abrupt halt when Nijinsky secretly

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<sup>23</sup> Larkin (2013), 102.

<sup>24</sup> Bellow (2013), 31.

<sup>25</sup> Yoshida argues in 'Proust et les ballets russes' that the relationship between Morel and Charlus in the *Recherche* was modelled on that of Nijinsky and Diaghilev (60-61).

married fellow dancer Romula de Pulszky during a South America tour, resulting in his dismissal from the troupe in 1913.

### *Kinesis and the Signifying Body*

At the outset of this article, I asked to what extent the dance revolution Proust witnessed was assimilated into his own reflections and representations of gesture and the body in movement. To what extent can we speak of a Proustian choreography of writing? Proust criticism has explored the rich linguistic aspects of the *Recherche*, that is, the author's sustained attention to sociolects and ideolects, his individualisation of characters through their particular ways of speaking, their verbal idiosyncrasies or flawed pronunciation, right down to the grain and timbre of the voice as markers of personality and identity. By contrast, his equally acute sensitivity to the expressive language of the body is less well studied. Richard W. Saunders and Livio Belloï, and, more recently, Liza Gabaston and Patrick Ffrench, have offered fascinating readings of the Proustian body, its signs and gestures.<sup>26</sup> Aine Larkin, in the article already mentioned, explores the role of theatre and dance in Proust's private life and fiction. Yet no detailed study to date relates gestural language and the body in the *Recherche* to the modern dance revolution that shook France in the early twentieth century.

Beyond intermittent references to the Ballets Russes, metaphors and similes invoking dance are frequent in the *Recherche*, as are scenes which show a distinct concern for choreography and a detailed attention to the body in motion. One need only think of the strikingly choreographed scene in *Le Côté de Guermantes* where Saint-Loup gracefully climbs over the benches of a restaurant to bring the chilly Narrator the Prince de Foix's vicuna cloak. The young man's virtuoso performance, necessitating nimble jumps over loose wires and a vertiginous balancing act on the seats' backrests, wins the applause of the restaurant staff and its distinguished clientele (II, 705).<sup>27</sup> The choreographic nature of this scene was not lost on Proust's contemporaries: Robert de Montesquiou, in a letter to the author, refers to it as 'sa danse de la banquette, réglée par Fokine'.<sup>28</sup> More intriguingly, Cocteau put into circulation a humorous poem he passed off as Proust's (but which was in fact penned by himself) in which he leaps on a table next to Nijinsky to cover the sickly Proust with a fur

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<sup>26</sup> Richard W. Saunders, *Metamorphoses of the Proustian Body: A Study of Bodily Signs in A la recherche du temps perdu* (New York: Peter Lang, 1994), Livio Belloï, *La scène proustienne: Proust, Goffman et le théâtre du monde* (Paris: Nathan, 1993), Liza Gabaston, *Le Langage du corps dans À la recherche du temps perdu* (Paris: Champion, 2011), Patrick Ffrench, 'Proust and the Analysis of Gesture', in *Proust and the Visual*, ed. Nathalie Aubert (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2012), 47-67.

<sup>27</sup> Patrick Ffrench offers a compelling reading of this scene in 'Proust and the Analysis of Gesture' linking it to both sculpture and proto-cinematography. Ffrench is particularly interested in questions of ethics and morality in relation to the moving body, in this instance the 'racially generated gestural style' (57) of Saint-Loup as a member of the aristocracy.

<sup>28</sup> Letter of 14 June 1921, *Corr.*, XX, 337.

coat.<sup>29</sup> Whilst this anecdote speaks volumes about the poet's desire to be identified as model for Saint-Loup in the *Recherche*, it also picks up on the inherent dance analogy of the scene, since Cocteau not only stages himself in the company of Nijinsky, but transfers the sylph-like agility of the dancer to his own (fictional) bravura performance.

It is equally instructive to examine the passage in *A l'ombre des jeunes filles en fleurs* where the Narrator dwells on the young girls' mastery of gestural language, contrasted with the jerky, disjointed movements of the other seaside walkers who sway on the dam as if it were the deck of a ship (II, 147). The girls' bodies possess the perfect suppleness of good waltzers: keeping each of their limbs in complete independence, while most of their body remains immobile, they are utterly free in their movements. Precisely this agility is in evidence a few pages later when the eldest of the little gang, with nimble feet, jumps over an infirm gentleman peacefully seated on a deck chair (II, 150). The girl's elevated position on the bandstand combined with her agile jump once again evoke the virtuoso performance of a dancer on a theatre stage – indeed, the old man's terror brings to mind the fear that apparently seized spectators seated in the first ranks every time Nijinsky performed one of his legendary leaps. More literally, any discussion of dance performances in the *Recherche* must include the much commented 'danse contre seins' between Andrée and Albertine at the Balbec casino (III, 191) where Cottard's indiscreet comment that the two young women are undoubtedly at the height of sexual arousal alerts the Narrator to the erotic potential of dance, stoking his anxiety as to Albertine's sexual orientation. Not to forget, of course, the encounter between Jupien and Charlus, famously metaphorised as the bumblebee dancing around the orchid, which I shall revisit in more detail shortly.<sup>30</sup> Scenes like the ones just cited and that of the dancer of genius discussed previously hint at a close semantic connection in the novel between dance and sexuality – especially homosexuality – which echoes the association between leading figures of the modern dance revolution such as Nijinsky and Duncan and sexual and gender mobility that were rife with early twentieth-century audiences.

Arguably the most striking choreography in the *Recherche* is the Jupien-Charlus 'conjunction' whose metaphorical construction has been brilliantly analysed by David Ellison.<sup>31</sup> In its gestural language, attention to facial expression and synchronised bodily movements, the two men's encounter in the Guermantes courtyard, famously naturalised by the extended botanical analogy, resembles a pantomimic *pas de deux* (III, 6-9) The performative nature of the scene is highlighted through the stage-like set up of the courtyard with the Narrator as spectator, as well as the reference to improvisation within a carefully

<sup>29</sup> 'Afin de me couvrir de fourrure et de moire / Sans de ses larges yeux renverser l'encre noire. / Tel un sylphe au plafond, tel sur la neige un ski / Jean sauta sur la table auprès de Nijinski.' Cited in *Corr*, XII, 223, footnote 6 (letter to Cocteau, July 1913).

<sup>30</sup> Another reference to dance that is worth mentioning is the 'Bal de têtes' in *Le Temps retrouvé*, a 'dance macabre' as comments Magill (52).

<sup>31</sup> *A Reader's Guide to Proust's 'In Search of Lost Time'* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 210), 116-22.

studied movement language. Terms like 'attitude', 'poses' and 's'élancer' are borrowed from the vocabulary of dance. Charlus is the first to enter the metaphorical stage, his temporarily relaxed face affording the Narrator a glimpse of the Baron's concealed 'natural state' behind the factitious mask of a stylised masculinity. When Jupien comes on stage, the two men engage in a subtly coordinated performance, where each man's facial expression, gestures and poses is made to harmonise with those of the other: Charlus, rooted like a plant, gazes intently at the waistcoat-maker whilst the latter, transfixed, contemplates the Baron's embonpoint. As soon as the former puts on an air of feigned indifference, staring into space to best bring out the beauty of his eyes, Jupien, in perfect symmetry, draws back his head, coquettishly poses his fist on his hip and makes his behind stick out. As Livio Belloï comments, 'surpris chacun par le regard de l'Autre, les individus se mettent *on*, enclenchent simultanément leur rituel, leur routine de séduction'.<sup>32</sup>

This burlesque choreography of desire, like ballet (but unlike theatre similes in Proust, which usually involve some verbal interaction), operates altogether without words. The stylised body movements of the two men corroborated by the stark expressiveness of their faces *become* a language in their own right: 'toutes les deux minutes, la même question semblait intensément posée à Jupien dans l'oeillade de M. de Charlus' (III, 7). As a non-verbal art, dance, on which Proust seems to be drawing in this scene, has recourse to facial and bodily expressivity in order to 'narrate' a story, to illumine what another great twentieth-century dancer and choreographer, Martha Graham, called the 'cave of the heart'.<sup>33</sup> It is worth drawing on Hegel for a moment, who, while being ambivalent towards dance, proves instructive for understanding the role of gesture as a non-verbal language. In his monumental *Aesthetic*, the philosopher dispenses with dance as an 'imperfect art' worthy only of passing mention alongside gardening.<sup>34</sup> The reason Hegel should think so lowly of an art that not only has a distinguished history, but fulfils an important spiritual role in diverse cultures is that, for him, contemporary (that is, early nineteenth-century) dance has deteriorated to a mere dexterity of movement devoid of sense or intellectual richness. If it were to regain some spiritual expression beyond a mere bravura of the legs, ballet requires 'measured movement in harmony with our emotions and a freedom of grace that are extremely rare'. Only pantomime – that is, gestures carrying such a degree of expression that words are no longer necessary – can 'lift ballet into the free realm of art'.<sup>35</sup> Hegel's succinct reflections on ballet proved visionary: in opposition to the soulless technical mastery of the classical tradition, dance did indeed re-establish itself as a serious art form to be reckoned with, thanks to the

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<sup>32</sup> Belloï (1993), 88.

<sup>33</sup> The expression 'illumine the cave of the heart', inspired by Graham's piece, is borrowed from Susan Leigh Foster, *Reading Dancing: Bodies and Subjects in Contemporary American Dance* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), 25.

<sup>34</sup> G.W.F. Hegel, *Aesthetics*, trans. by T. M. Knox, 2 vols (Oxford: Clarendon, 1975), II, 627.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 1192.

modern dance revolution of the early twentieth century. Its alleged capability to convey feeling in a language intelligible to all, independent of their culture and background, consolidated its reputation as a universal language. The Ballets Russes performances in particular, with their Orientalising themes, freed body movement, and interest in pagan, 'primitive' rites (crystallised in the *Rite of Spring*'s sacrificial theme) were considered a vehicle for the primal, instinctive and libidinal dimensions of human nature. More generally, in the expressive choreographies of early twentieth-century dance, gesture and movement were seen as an outlet for the desiring body, a metaphor for erotic experience and a window onto interiority and subjectivity. As the composer François Delsarte, who influenced dancers like Isadora Duncan put it, '[l]e geste est l'agent direct du coeur'.<sup>36</sup>

Echoes of the Ballets Russes in the Jupien-Charlus conjunction can be gathered in references to Orientalism ('quelque cité orientale') and rite ('prélude rituel'), as well as in the Narrator's insistence on natural bodies liberated from the pressures of civilisation ('plus près de la nature encore'). The hybridity of the two men's bodies, which morph from 'homme' to 'homme-oiseau' and 'homme-insecte', is reminiscent of the nature/civilisation binary surrounding Ballets Russes discourses and evocative of the human/animal trope in works like Nijinsky's *L'Après-midi d'un faune* or the great Loïe Fuller's kinetic ballets. The American dancer, having conquered the Parisian stage some decade earlier, remained prominent well into the twentieth century with pieces such as *Nocturnes* which she performed at the Théâtre des Champs Élysées in 1913. She had forged a reputation for transforming her dancing body into organic, floral or animal shapes thanks to a pair of baton-like wands and a sophisticated new lighting technique. The 'homme-insecte' image also evokes Nijinsky's insect-like stage persona in *Le Spectre de la rose*: in her biography of the dancer, his wife Romula de Pulszky reminisces that he looked like 'a celestial (heavenly) insect, his eyebrows suggesting some beautiful beetle'.<sup>37</sup> The Narrator of the *Recherche* comments on the strangeness, or, rather, he corrects himself, the 'naturalness' of the spectacle afforded by the two men, but insists above all on its beauty (III, 7).

How, then, to conclude, can Proust's writing be seen to converge with and echo the modern dance revolution he witnessed? In his essay 'Notes on Gesture', Giorgio Agamben links modern dance and the Proustian novel as part of a final artistic effort to regain lost gestures:

The dance of Isadora and Diaghilev, the novels of Proust, the great *Jugendstil* poets from Pascoli to Rilke and ultimately – in the most exemplary way – silent cinema,

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<sup>36</sup> François Delsarte, cit. by Ted Shawn, *Chaque petit mouvement. A propos de François Delsarte* (Brussels/Pantin: Editions Complexe/Centre national de la danse, 2005), 62.

<sup>37</sup> Nijinsky (Simon & Schuster, 1980), 136-37.

trace the magic circle in which humanity sought, for the last time, to evoke what was slipping through its fingers for ever.<sup>38</sup>

Just like their contemporary, the art historian Aby Warburg (also mentioned by Agamben), all these artists were engaged in a project to preserve the gestural richness of Western humankind, a richness that risked vanishing under the pressure of modernity, with its double threat to human experience and bodily expressiveness. Proust was not only aware of the Ballets Russes's significance as a repository of gestures and corporeal expressivity; he shared with and imported from the modern dance revolution a number of further central concerns. Ballet's specificity as a temporal medium of immediacy allowed him to draw important conclusions as to the impermanence of artistic creation and the necessity of capturing human existence in all its fluidity. As inheritors of the Wagnerian *Gesamtkunstwerk*, Ballets Russes performances sensitised him to the possibility of a total artwork in which different art forms are allowed to dialogue in a harmonious synthesis. But perhaps most crucially, the modern dance revolution of the early twentieth century, with its problematisation of natural and technological bodies, its pronounced gender and sexual ambivalence, and its crossovers between the human and the non-human, resonated with his own interest in questions of corporeality, polymorphous gender and sexual identities, and in the feeling body. As agents of modernity, both Proust's novel and modern dance heralded a new form of embodied subjectivity, in which the body becomes a privileged site of expression and experience.

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<sup>38</sup> *Infancy and History: The Destruction of Experience* (London: Verso, 1993), 138. Agamben's essay is extensively commented on by French in 'Proust and the Analysis of Gesture'.